

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

TO: Superintendents of Schools, High School Principals, Social Studies Department Heads

FROM: Betty J. Sternberg, Associate Commissioner

DATE: September 27, 2000

RE: New Civics Legislation

Commencing with classes graduating in 2004, students will be required to have a one-half credit course in civics and American government as part of the three social studies credit graduation requirement (Public Act No. 00-156). The new legislation amends Section 10-221a of the General Statutes as follows:

“(a) Commencing with classes graduating in 2004, and for each graduating class thereafter, no local or regional board of education shall permit any student to graduate from high school or grant a diploma to any student who has not satisfactorily completed a minimum of twenty credits, not fewer than four of which shall be in English, not fewer than three in mathematics, not fewer than three in social studies, including at least a one-half credit course on civics and American government, not fewer than two in science, not fewer than one in the arts or vocational education and not fewer than one in physical education.” (Section 10-221a of the Connecticut General Statutes).

The civics requirement grows out of a concern that young citizens are disengaged from the democratic process. A combination of factors has led to the decline of civics as a discipline to be valued and supported. There was the mistaken belief that by simply growing up in a democratic society, democratic understandings and behaviors would somehow be imparted to the next generation and behaviors that go along with that understanding would be exhibited via active participation in democratic processes and institutions. However, apathy and low voter turnouts indicated otherwise. It appears that many Americans understand little of what it means to live in a democracy that demands voluntary participation. Another rationale for the decline of civics as a discipline focuses on the way the subject has been taught and the seemingly drawn out and frustrating process of “government in action.” The structures of government and the processes of how laws are enacted and changed can be a tedious process that can quickly lead to a disconnect with everyday life. Relevance to life is imperative for students to reconnect with democratic behaviors and institutions as citizens of the United States. It is this connection which must be explicitly made for students as a part of civics education. In the past 30 years, courses focusing on law-related education and current issues have sought to develop these behaviors. However, these courses are generally electives not required to be taken by all students.

Since schools need to begin planning immediately to ensure that courses are in place, the following questions and answers are provided:

1. How are social studies and civics related?

Social studies by definition has as the primary goal the preparation of citizens. That goal is reflected in the definition drawn from the National Council for the Social Studies and reflected in **Connecticut's Social Studies Curriculum Framework, K-12:**

“By the end of Grade 12, students will gain a knowledge of history, civics and government, geography and economics; understand the interaction between and among history, the social sciences and humanities; and apply that knowledge and understanding as responsible citizens.”

While civics and government is a defined discipline, it is difficult to apply in an isolated context. That is why the social studies community believes that students must have knowledge and understanding in a variety of disciplines that affect civic behavior.

2. Can courses in United States history be used to fulfill the required one-half credit in civics?

Most Connecticut high schools require one year or one credit of United States history for graduation. By tradition and practice, schools have used Section 10-18 of the General Statutes as the basis for the requirement. Section 10-18 states: "Courses in United States history, government and duties and responsibilities of citizenship. (a) All high, preparatory, secondary and elementary schools, public or private, whose property is except from taxation, shall provide a program of United States history, including instruction in United States government at the local, state and national levels, and in the duties, responsibilities, and rights of United States citizenship. No student shall be graduated from any such school who has not been found to be familiar with said subjects." Some high schools in Connecticut are now requiring and/or offering more than one year of United States history. In cases where schools offer more than one year of United States history, it is reasonable to utilize the existing course to design one or more one-half credit courses to fulfill the civics requirement. The course would need a title and description that clearly designates the course as civics. The civics standards identified in question # 4 provide guidance in defining the course as civics. Question #3 offers two alternatives that use history to provide instruction in civics: constitutional history approach and the current issues approach. History courses that focus on the 20th century and the constitutional period are more obvious alternatives to consider. We strongly recommend that if a high school offers one year in United States history, one or more semesters of that one year course should not be used to meet the civics requirement. In such cases, we recommend a separate one-half credit course offering to be taken by all students graduating in 2004.

3. What course approaches can be used to meet the one-half credit course requirement?

The new requirement provides an opportunity to expand existing course offerings in civics and create courses that reflect what we know about our students and teaching. A vast array of model approaches is available for schools to consider:

Law-Related Education Approach. Beginning in the 1960's, a new approach to civic education was developed out of a concern for the lack of emphasis and understanding of the judicial branch of government. Students were introduced to such activity as police resource units, mock trial competitions and courtroom visits. The idea was to help students understand their rights and responsibilities. In part, this movement was an attempt to make civics more engaging. Over time, this approach replaced the more comprehensive civics approach focusing on the three branches of government. In more recent years, this movement returned to a more comprehensive approach to civics with an invigorated pedagogy.

Constitutional History Approach. The constitutional period in U.S. history is a part of the canon of instruction in American history courses. It is a blend of the people, events and ideas that came together to form a written constitution. This period is valued as a turning point in the history of the world. The challenge for teachers is the same as with anything historical. History can remain in the past but it also forms the basis for how we think and behave today. Application and relevance is the key to making this approach work.

Current Issues Approach. On the other end of the spectrum opposite the constitutional history approach is applying civics to current events. Students are usually familiar with and have interest in events occurring in their own environment. They offer the opportunity to watch issues being debated by people living in the present and to observe how and why decisions are made. Students will understand little about current issues in depth unless they know what has happened in the past to bring these issues to the table. Making historical connections is the key to making this approach effective.

Civics/Government Approach. Traditionally, the civics/government approach has focused on the beliefs and structure of democratic government. The approach in the past has often relied heavily on a textbook and used a pedagogical pattern reflecting passive instruction. New approaches include mixing and blending elements of the current issues, constitutional history and law related education approaches. The ideal course is one that combines elements of all of the approaches. Any civic issue has its roots in constitutional history that requires knowledge of the structure of our government, how ideas about governing changes over time, and application to the current world in which we live.

4. What should be the components of the new civics course?

Regardless of which approach is chosen to fulfill the requirements of the new civics requirement, the Civics and Government content standards enumerated in **Connecticut's Social Studies Curriculum Framework, K-12** provide a guide to course development. Through the study of civics and government students should be able to demonstrate competence by applying the content standards to their lives and ensuring that our society will have students prepared to participate as thoughtful and informed citizens.

Civics and Government Content Standards

(Connecticut's Social Studies Curriculum Framework, pp. 12-16)

United States Constitution and Government

Students will apply knowledge of the U.S. Constitution, how the U.S. system of government works and how the rule of law and the value of liberty and equality have an impact on individual, local, state and national decisions.

Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens

Students will demonstrate knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizens to participate and shape public policy, and contribute to the maintenance of our democratic way of life.

Political Systems

Students will explain that political systems emanate from the need of humans for order, leading to compromise and the establishment of authority.

International Relations

Students will demonstrate an understanding of how the major elements of international relations and world affairs affect their lives and the security and well being of their community, state and nation.

5. Since we integrate civics in all our courses, may that count toward the one-half course credit requirement?

No. The legislation requires a one-half credit course on civics and American government as part of the three social studies credit requirement. Integration is an important dimension of civic education. However, there is a body of content knowledge that specifically addresses civics. Without that focused foundation in American democracy, it is difficult to assure that students will apply those principles in an environment where that knowledge has not been taught.

6. How can the civics requirement be used to assist students with the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT)?

Decision making and participation are essential skills in civics education and align with fundamental skills required in the Grade 10 CAPT. The new required one-half civics credit as well other social studies courses are appropriate for helping students to gain civic knowledge and skill as participatory citizens.

7. What human resources are available to assist in implementing the new civics requirement?

There are a number of organizations and institutions ready to offer assistance.

League of Women Voters of Connecticut has representatives prepared to work with school districts in helping to design courses. The League can be reached at 1890 Dixwell Avenue, Suite 113, Hamden, CT 06514, phone (203) 288-7996.

Connecticut Consortium for Law and Citizenship Education offers civic-related programs for schools and professional development for teachers. They will be developing a model course outline available for distribution in September 2000. The Consortium can be reached at: 30 Trinity Street, P. O. Box 150470, Hartford, CT 06115, (860) 509-6184.

Old State House is Connecticut's living history of civics in our state. More than 68 towns, 1,000 classes and 423 schools visited the Old State House this past year. The Old House can be reached at 800 Main Street, Hartford, CT 06103, phone (860) 522

Office of the Secretary of State offers information on voter registration for high school students, sponsors programs to encourage civic participation, and distributes government information of interest to the education community. The Office of the Secretary of State can be reached at: 210 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT 06106, phone (860) 509-6000.

Connecticut State Department of Education can assist in course design and providing and people who are willing to help. The Social Studies Consultant, Daniel Gregg be reached at 165 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT 06106, phone (860) 713-6744.

*Connecticut Public Affairs Network (CTN) offers live coverage of state legislative proceedings and other forums where public decisions are made. More recently, they have developed curriculum to accompany video footage by topic on selected legislative proceedings. CTN can be reached at: 221 North Main Street, Suite 501, Hartford, CT 06106, phone (860) 246-1547.

*Contact information change effective January 31, 2002. Connecticut Public Affairs Network (CTN), 21 Oak Street, Suite 605, Hartford, CT 06106, phone (860)-246-1553.

The Close Up Foundation offers resources and materials as well as direct experience with government in Washington, DC where students can observe and discuss current issues facing our state and nation. The Close Up Foundation can be reached at: 44 Canal Center Plaza, Alexandria, VA 22314-1592, phone (800) 336-2167.

The Judicial Branch, State of Connecticut, has developed a curriculum to provide high school students with a thorough understanding of the rule of law, the role of the courts and the structure and function of the Connecticut Judicial Branch as it relates to the two other independent branches of government. The curriculum can be obtained by contacting the External Affairs Unit of the Connecticut Judicial Branch at (860) 757-2270 or their web site at <http://www.jud.state.ct.us/directory/directory/administrative/extaffairs.htm>

For questions or additional information regarding the new civics and American government requirement, contact: [Daniel W. Gregg, Social Studies Consultant](#), Connecticut State Department of Education, phone (860) 713-6744.

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